ChatGPT

Philosophy Goes Full Circle: A Developer's Journey to the True Self

Author's Note: This essay is a playful thought experiment by a developer who loves to philosophize through code. It isn't a scholarly treatise, but a speculative journey that treats philosophy like a programming adventure. In these pages, I imagine writing a program for self-discovery. Each major philosophical insight becomes a function or module in code, executed step by step (and sometimes recursively) by human reasoning. The goal isn't to produce rigid answers, but to enjoy the process of thinking itself. If you're ready to join a coder-philosopher on a journey round and round in search of the "true me," let's begin.

I sit at my desk, the soft glow of the screen before me, and ponder the age-old question: Who am I, really? As a developer, my instinct is to solve problems by breaking them into modules. Could discovering my true self be approached like running a program? I crack a smile and begin imagining a snippet of Python code that might encapsulate this philosophical quest:

```
# Philosophy as Code (a playful thought experiment)

def find_true_self(identity, iteration=1, max_iterations=3):
    # Base case: if we've reached a stopping point, return current identity
    if iteration > max_iterations:
        return identity

    # Socrates: Ask fundamental questions (the unexamined life is not worth living)
    identity = ask_questions(identity)       # probe assumptions about self

    # Nietzsche: Break the old idols and assumptions
    identity = break_idols(identity)         # shatter false beliefs and values

    # Buddha: Empty the self of attachments
    identity = empty_self(identity)          # let go of ego and desires

    # Confucius: Share and cultivate virtue in community
    identity = share_with_world(identity)  # find oneself among others

    # Jesus: Forgive and embrace compassion
    identity = practice_forgiveness(identity)   # release guilt, extend love

    # Recursive call – philosophy goes round and round
    return find_true_self(identity, iteration+1, max_iterations)

# Start the journey
me = "self"
true_self = find_true_self(me)
print("True self discovered:", true_self)
```

In my mind's eye, this program outlines a journey through five stages of wisdom. Each stage is inspired by a great thinker who acts like a function call in the code of life. I take a deep breath and run the program mentally, stepping into the first function.

Socrates – Asking Questions. The moment I call `ask_questions(me)`, the voice of Socrates resonates in my thoughts. He was the master of relentless questioning, famous for insisting that "the unexamined life is not worth living" [1]. Under Socrates' guidance, I begin to pepper myself with questions: What do I believe about who I am? Why do I hold these beliefs? Like a skilled debugger, Socrates helps me pause the execution of daily life and inspect my internal variables. I find that much of "who I am" has been taken for granted – a collection of habits, opinions, and labels I've never truly examined. Socrates prompts me to be skeptical of easy answers and to embrace **self-awareness** through critical thinking [1]. With each question, I peel back a layer of assumption. I admit that I don't fully know myself (indeed, Socrates would nod – I know that I know nothing). Yet, this realization isn't defeating; it's liberating. It means there's room to learn and grow. The Socratic module returns an output: a curious mind, humbled but eager to seek truth. My "identity" at this point is less fixed – and that's progress. The code moves on to the next step.

Nietzsche – Breaking Illusions. Now the program calls `break_idols(identity)`. Enter Nietzsche with his hammer. If Socrates opened my eyes to my ignorance, Friedrich Nietzsche barges in to ensure I don't simply latch onto new comforting beliefs. He encourages me to philosophize with a hammer, tapping on every old idol of thought to hear which ones sound hollow [2]. One by one, I hold up my values and truths to Nietzsche's ear. Career success, social approval, even the idea of a fixed "true self" – are these solid or just hollow conventions? Nietzsche is unafraid of smashing false idols. He urges me to break the tables of values I've inherited and create my own. This stage is bold and a bit chaotic – it feels like taking apart a machine to see how it works, or refactoring a legacy codebase by discarding code that no longer makes sense. It's not wanton destruction; it's clearing out the unworthy ideas to make space for something authentic [3] [2]. I must confront uncomfortable possibilities: What if some of my deeply held beliefs are just societal programming? What if "who I am" is partly a story I was told, not one I wrote? Nietzsche's function doesn't return a neatly packaged identity – it returns **fragments**. But in those broken pieces, I start to see glimmers of honesty. There's a strange exhilaration in this intellectual rebellion, a delight in hearing the "hollow sound" of a false belief shattering [2]. I'm left with uncertainties, yes, but also a newfound determination to live by my own truth, not someone else's.

Buddha – Emptying the Self. After the storm of Nietzschean iconoclasm, the program enters a quieter phase: `empty_self(identity)`. The Buddha now joins the journey, not with questions or hammers, but with a gentle smile. I picture Siddhartha Gautama sitting under the Bodhi tree, eyes closed in serene meditation. He invites me to consider that beyond all my questions and concepts, there may be a deeper stillness. Perhaps the self I'm so eager to define doesn't need to be defined at all. In Buddhist philosophy, everything – including what we call the self – is inherently empty of independent identity [4]. This isn't a nihilistic void but a recognition that every part of "me" is interdependent with the world. I contemplate the idea that there is no single, fixed "I" at the core, only a flow of experiences, thoughts, and perceptions arising and passing. As I follow Buddha's guidance, I practice letting go of my attachments and ego-driven desires. It feels like releasing clutter from a crowded room – a spacious clarity begins to emerge. In code terms, this might be like freeing up memory and clearing temporary variables, allowing the system to run more smoothly. Emptiness here is not frightening; it's peaceful. I experience moments where the usual chatter in my mind quiets down. Who am I? becomes a question not of labels or stories, but of direct experience in the present moment. I realize that at the deepest level, finding the "true self" might require a paradoxical step: **forgetting the self**, emptying out all the conditioned thoughts about "me". In this emptiness, I feel a lightness and compassion that radiates outward. The Buddha's module returns a calm mind and an open heart, ready to reconnect with the world afresh.

Confucius – Sharing and Community. The next function in our philosophical program is `share_with_world(identity)`. After turning inward, I now turn outward, guided by the wisdom of Confucius. This ancient Chinese teacher reminds me that no journey of self-discovery happens in isolation. We find ourselves in relation to others. Confucian philosophy emphasizes that personal virtue is cultivated through our engagement with family, society, and tradition [5]. I reflect on the roles I play – as a friend, a colleague, a son, a citizen. Each relationship teaches me something about who I am. Confucius would likely say that to become my true self, I must also become a responsible part of my community. He speaks of **仁 (ren)** – humaneness or benevolence – the love that binds people. In practical terms, this means sharing what I've learned with others and listening to their insights in turn. I recall times when helping someone or learning from someone made me feel more me than ever. It's as if my identity isn't a solitary island but a node in a living network of human connections. In Confucius's view, the self is realized with others: by practicing kindness, justice, proper conduct, and wisdom in everyday life [5]. So I start applying this: I call up a friend just to ask how they are and really listen; I engage more sincerely at work, imagining how my code or actions can benefit others; I even take interest in old family stories, seeing myself as part of a lineage, not just an isolated ego. This stage of the journey returns a sense of **belonging**. My "identity" now is richer and more nuanced – it includes traces of everyone who has touched my life. In sharing myself, I discover myself. Confucius has added a beautiful module to the program: one that prints not to the screen, but to the heart, reminding me that personal growth and communal effort go hand in hand [5].

Jesus – Forgiveness and Love. Finally, the program calls `practice_forgiveness(identity)`. This might be the most challenging step of all. Here, I am guided by the spirit of Jesus, a figure of profound compassion. The teaching of forgiveness flows through him: love your enemies, forgive those who wrong you, and perhaps hardest of all, forgive yourself. As I enter this stage, I realize how many burdens I still carry – regrets from past actions, guilt over mistakes, grudges against those who hurt me. These are like bugs in my code, causing emotional crashes or endless loops of resentment. Jesus encourages me to release them. I recall the powerful scene of him on the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" [6]. Even in the depths of suffering, he exemplified unconditional love and forgiveness. I don't pretend to have that level of grace, but I take a deep look at the "error logs" in my mind – the old pains and grudges – and I attempt to let them go, one by one. I forgive a friend who betrayed my trust years ago; I forgive myself for not always living up to who I want to be. With each act of forgiveness, I feel a heavy weight lift. It's like cleaning the last bits of malware from a system, allowing it to run cleanly. Forgiveness, I learn, is less about others and more about my own freedom. It clears the path for love to flow in. Jesus's module returns an output of **empathy and acceptance**. I feel a warm connection to humanity at large, a sense that being true to myself means living with an open heart. In this love – both of others and self – I catch a glimpse of something divine, or if that word is too grand, something deeply human that shines in me and everyone.

The program has now executed all its functions once. Socrates's questions, Nietzsche's destruction, Buddha's emptiness, Confucius's community, and Jesus's forgiveness – these have all played their part. So, have I found my true self at the end of this cycle? The screen in my mind prints: `"True self discovered:"` and I pause, unsure what to fill in. I realize that my "true self" isn't a static object to grasp, but a **continuum**. It evolves with each iteration of this journey. In fact, the journey could loop back and run again (and perhaps it will, many times in my life). Philosophy, after all, goes round and round – each time coming full circle but at a slightly higher vantage point, like climbing a spiral staircase. I might circle back to Socratic questions tomorrow, then break new illusions, find new depths of emptiness, engage in new acts of sharing and new moments of forgiveness. And that's okay. In fact, that's wonderful.

As a developer, I know a program may not return the expected result on the first run. It often takes refining and rerunning. The code of life is no different. My little thought experiment affirms that the process is what's enlightening, not some final printout. With each stage of this journey, I felt more alive,

more connected, and more at peace with not having a definite answer. The joy was in the thinking itself – in exploring ideas playfully and honestly, without clinging to a single “right” answer. In the end, perhaps the search for the true self is the true self: a being that is curious, courageous, compassionate, and continuously growing.

I close my eyes and let the insights settle. The room is quiet now; the code has stopped running for the moment. There is no dramatic revelation, only a subtle understanding: I am the one who has journeyed through all these thoughts and come out a little more aware. I smile, recalling the author’s note I began with – this has indeed been a playful ride, not a thesis. And like any good recursive function, it ends by pointing back to its start. I find myself again at the question that began it all: Who am I? The difference is that now I’m comfortable not knowing for sure. I’ll keep asking, breaking, emptying, sharing, and forgiving, looping through life’s mysteries. Each loop is its own reward. Each circle brings me closer to a truth that can’t be captured in words, only lived.

And so the journey continues, round and round, an endless adventure of the mind and spirit. In this recursive dance of philosophy, I am content to be a traveler – a coder of ideas – savoring the **freedom and joy of thinking** without end.

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1 The unexamined life is not worth living - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_unexamined_life_is_not_worth_living

2 3 What did Nietzsche mean by the words " philosophizing with a hammer"? - Philosophy Stack Exchange
https://philosophy.stackexchange.com/questions/21586/what-did-nietzsche-mean-by-the-words-philosophizing-with-a-hammer

4 Emptiness/No-Self – Encyclopedia Buddhica Fall 2019
https://encyclopediabuddhicaf19.andrewquintman.wescreates.wesleyan.edu/blog/e/emptiness-no-self/

5 Confucianism - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism

6 Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up His garments by casting lots.
https://biblehub.com/luke/23-34.htm